

CSWS Research Matters

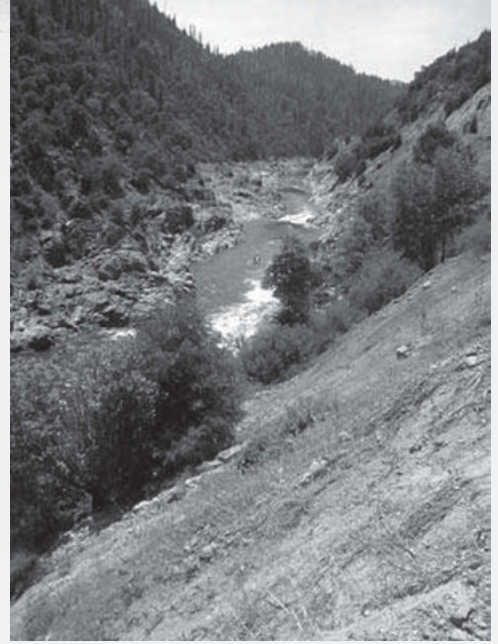
Salmon, Women, and Rivers

Community-Based Performance Research

BY THERESA J. MAY, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon Theatre Arts

In September 2002 an estimated 70,000 salmon died on the banks of the Lower Klamath River. At the time I was assistant professor at Humboldt State University, located about 40 minutes south of the mouth of the Klamath, on California's north coast. The fish kill, as locals called the event, impacted Native fisheries, as well as commercial fishing, in ways that are still being studied. Because of my research in theatre and environmental issues, the president of the university, Roland Richmond, invited me to attend a kind of emergency meeting of scientists, fish and wildlife officials, and water policy folks. I noticed two things at this meeting that stayed with me into the weeks that followed: 1) the room was electric with antagonisms, perceptible even through the veil of academic presentations; and 2) the back of the room was crowded with people from the tribal communities, for whom the catastrophe was not only economically measurable, but profoundly painful. The loss of the salmon signified an ongoing loss of traditional cultural ways of life. This loss, however, was not a topic in the room. The several elders in the back of the room were silent even as policy wonks and government officials presented theories about the causes of the fish kill and suggested potential directions for watershed management.

As a theatre artist with some faith in the vital role of the arts in democratic processes, I found myself asking, "What can theatre do?" After many discussions with Native colleagues in our Indian Teacher Education and Native Studies programs, the Klamath Theatre Project emerged. Over two years I worked with Native students, staff and faculty, and many community members, to write a play about the events of 2002, in particular to express the experiences and viewpoints of Native people who share a relationship with the salmon that seemed to be going unacknowledged in this crisis. The play was developed from interviews with Lower Klamath tribal members, as well as reflective and creative writing done by students. Research and stakeholder meeting transcripts allowed us to weave in the voices of Upper Klamath tribes, as well as farmers, ranchers, and other constituents of the Klamath watershed. Over two years, we read various versions of the script at community meetings and then listened to and gathered suggestions from the community for how to develop the play further. The final script, *Salmon Is Everything* (the title taken from an elder's description of the salmon's central place), premiered in spring 2006, performed by a cast of twelve Native and five non-Native members (most of whom had never acted before). In the community discussions held after every performance, led by Ron Reed, Karuk tribal member and Fisheries Program director, an audience of the real-world counterparts of the fictional characters of tribal families, scientists, farmers, ranchers, and others commented that what had been contentious and impossible in mediation rooms and courtrooms became possible in the theatre: people found themselves listening to one another's stories. Elders remarked that the play spoke about their experience and in the manner of traditional storytelling, and young people said, "This is the only way we're going to solve these issues, by listening to one another's stories; not through governments and lawyers, but through people."



Klamath River, northern California

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Community dialogue and policy assessment is ongoing in the Klamath watershed, but the fish kill of 2002 marks a turning point that has led to serious consideration of dam removal, and the significance of salmon populations to indigenous ways of life. Over time a play changes position, moving from a documentation of current events to a record of collective memory; but when that play is re-staged, it allows the past to live with, and participate in, the critical present. *Salmon Is Everything* now serves to locate the fish kill of 2002 as a turning point in the politics of the watershed, to mark and call attention to the grief experienced by members of the Lower Klamath tribal communities, and to illuminate the current and ongoing debates about dam removal, species preservation, indigenous rights, and the sustainable use of resources.

As part of the 2011 Season of the Department of Theatre Arts, I will direct a second production of *Salmon Is Everything* on the Robinson stage, part of the new Miller Theatre Complex. With funding from the Center for the Study of Women in Society, several members of the original Klamath Theatre Project team will come to UO to lead discussions after the performances, including Sue Burcell (Yurok), Mary Campbell (Hupa), and Kathy McCovey (Karuk), who will discuss the central role of women in this project and in relation to water resources. Native playwright Marcie Rendon (White Earth Anishinabe) will also give a talk about the emerging field of Native theatre studies.

In recent years the notion of performance-based research has gained ground in the academy. Rising out of dance, as well as experiential education scholarship, the field asserts that the arts represent ways of knowing that are distinct from more discursive or quantitative knowledge. The performing arts do not merely illuminate the facts in new ways; rather, these forms represent possible interrogations that lead to new knowledge. In the theatre empathy is both a methodology and a way of knowing. The empathy which may emerge from participating in or witnessing a community-based performance can lead to deeper, more complex

understandings, form new relationships across difference, and lay the groundwork for socially responsible action.

The story of the 2002 fish kill is part of a larger story, and a larger healing. The Klamath Theatre Project and the process of developing *Salmon Is Everything* provides a model for the ways in which theatre's methodology can give

voice to collective memory and contribute to healing historical trauma. My current Women and Rivers Project, funded in part through CSWS, will continue to build a body of performance-based research in the form of new works developed with and for regional communities. In partnership with the Oregon Toxics Alliance of Eugene, the first site of the research for the Women and Rivers Project will be Highway 36, which runs east-west along the Siuslaw River, connecting Junction City with the coastal mountains and towns of Deadwood and Mapleton. In 2010 through the Adopt-a-Highway program, the Oregon Toxics Alliance pledged to keep eight miles of Highway 36 free of knapweed. Weeding by hand will keep Oregon's Department of Transportation from using pesticides, as it normally does, to control weeds along the highway. OTA's work helps protect the Triangle Lake area and the salmon-bearing Lake Creek. Sounds like interesting material for a play? Perhaps not initially. However, at the heart of community-based theatre is the knowledge that the land holds stories, and like layers of sediment, these stories deserve to be told not only to know our local and regional histories, but also to

allow the past to participate in our decisions about the future. According to residents in the communities along Highway 36, this region was the site of testing for Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. These are stories worth telling, bodies of knowledge worth documenting, and issues that are part of Oregon's history and its future. ■

Editor's Note: *Salmon Is Everything* will be produced by Theatre Arts in the Miller Theatre Complex May 20 – June 4, 2011. UO Ticket office: (541) 346-4363

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Mary Campbell (Hupa) as "Julie" in the 2006 production of *Salmon is Everything* at Humboldt State (Photo: Kellie Brown).